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ABSTRACT

This paper was written in response to a paper by Jerry Phillips and his daughter, Charlie. Their paper, entitled "Mandated Testing: Lived Situations," was presented at the 1992 Annual Meeting of the American Reading Forum, and in it Jerry and Charlie recount the creation and development of a remedial reader, Charlie. One unique aspect of the story is Jerry's dual perspective of professional educator and involved parent. The writing style of the story as Jerry tells it is straightforward, clear, and relentless--the talk of an angry parent. The complexity of the story increases when Charlie begins to interact with her father in the manuscript: her comments, alternating with his critique, play out the themes and issues from the perspective of the victim. It is a complex text, offering interpretive readings from several frames of reference and providing, in Charlie, a case study of R. Rist's labeling theory. First, there is the frame of Jerry's and Charlie's stories as event and content. Second, the structure and organization of the text suggest that the meanings may be deeper than the issues and events themselves. A third way of interpreting the text is as an example of a postmodern report form, or writing that seeks to represent the constructive nature of its own formation. (RS)

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Critical Narratives and Labeling Theory: Another Look at Jerry and Charlie

This paper is written in response to a paper by Jerry Phillips made at the American Reading Forum 1992.

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Critical Narratives and Labeling Theory: Another Look at Jerry and Charlie.

I first met Charlie during the fall of 1986. Her father, Jerry, wrote her into my class and my life as a course project. We all lived and worked in Texas. Now it is 1993. Charlie is a freshman in college. Jerry is a professor, and I am living in Florida. We have moved and moved on. It is Charlie's path and Jerry's paper about her travels that still binds us. It is the focus for the current paper.

In Mandated Testing: Lived Situations, Jerry and Charlie recount the creation and development of a remedial reader, Charlie. One unique aspect of the story is the dual perspective of professional educator and involved parent. His passionate advocacy is also informed by sound research and a critical theoretical attitude toward the literacies that schools require. The writing and telling style Jerry chooses for Mandated Testing is straightforward, clear and relentless. It is the talk of an angry parent. It is the remorse of a culpable co-conspirator. It is the discourse of critical dissent.

The complexity of Mandated Testing increases when Charlie begins to interact with her father in the manuscript. Her views don't so much conflict with those of her dad. Rather, Charlie's comments play out the themes and issues from another perspective, the victim. It is a complex text, offering interpretive readings from several frames of reference. First, there is the frame of Jerry's and Charlie's stories as event and content. Here readers consider what Jerry and Charlie see as the chain of events, the

cause relationships they bring to these events, and how they respond to them. Secondly, the structure and organization of the text suggest that the meanings may be deeper that the issues and events themselves. By this, I mean that Jerry's arrangement of the text suggests that he intends an agenda, a representation of beliefs, and a form of critique that go beyond those issues that he and Charlie have explicitly made in the text. A third way of interpreting the text is as an example of a postmodern report form, or writing that seeks to represent the constructive nature of its own formation. Each of these interpretations follows.

Jerry and Charlie tell the story

The issues that Jerry and Charlie bring into the text are painful ones. After creating Charlie as a literate preschooler, Jerry learns that she is considered at risk for learning to read in first grade. He details a break of contract or "trust' with the school. As a form of critique, Phillips quotes a teacher's misuse of "poor auditory memories." In an economical way, he undermines the reasoning of school's labeling practices. Phillips's restatement of the plural "memories" evokes the absurdity of labeling, and the teacher's incompetence with carrying it out. The damage he does to readers' confidence in the teacher does not rectify the situation, neither in the narrative, nor in readers' resolution. But the anger embodied in such critical forms allows readers an emotional identification with his struggle. Seldom have we heard the voice of angry parents, voicing the betrayal that they feel.

In a personal way, Phillips describes the emergence of a dark side in Charlie's construction of school literacy. In doing so, he provides a case study of Rist's (1977) labeling theory and the meat of the argument in McDermott's (1985) achieving school failure. Jerry calls this emergence of Charlie's creative avoidance of remedial class "a strange occurrence." And like the description provided by Bloome (1981) of the subversive countercurriculum created by marginalized boys, Jerry describes his daughter's "drive toward athletic acceptance" as a countercurriculum. Regarding reading, Charlie develops a schizophrenic reality. At home, reading can be Judy Blume and any number of choices, including not to read. At school "reading [is] a difficult decoding game having little to do with...meaning." Charlie sees little connection. She negotiates these multiple realities of literacy until she is stopped by state mandated testing, the failure of which prevents her from timely high school graduation.

Charlie writes about her own failure to graduate in terms of the amount of test points she lacks and her threatened loss of social acceptability with her peers. Interestingly, she is supported immediately by two custodians, and later by her understanding friends. In her analysis she implies that the inequity is a social issue because she is only deficit a few points. Reading, I found myself agreeing with Charlie. Jerry fears for his daughter's sense of self, deals with his anger, submits to vacuous "explanations," and decides not to burn the

school. He ultimately appeals the major issue, and asks the school board's permission for his daughter to "walk with [her] peers" through graduation. His request is not approved, and he suggests he knew it going in.

Jerry cites the school's unwillingness to recognize Charlie's abilities, its practices of tracking students by school constructed "abilities," the production of disability as a curriculum, ineffective damage control, and a cover up, engineered, in part, by unquestioned patriarchy.

The text tells the story

From a second view, the way Jerry presents the account is rich with intention and meaning. The most apparent text feature is alternating the writing of Jerry and Charlie. Within the text, the two writers share events, but as different lived experiences. Their lives and the positioning that their roles create cause them to select different information. Further, they each foreground aspects that fit their social positions. Jerry does battle and writes to protect his daughter. His chooses events that demonstrate Charlie's strengths. Charlie's choices reflect her demands for equity and fairness. Her own role in the events is diminished.

The voice used by the two writers is also an interesting contrast. Jerry's careful, sotto voce accounts contrast sharply with Charlie's outfront, brutally honest sharing of her memories and emotions. The interplay between the two writing styles allows the text to present Jerry as an interpreter of context, who is

reserved in emotion. In relief, the text presents Charlie as the figure in Jerry's grounded context. As a set piece of reality, Charlie is reaction and affect, but she demonstrates little reflection.

On one hand the text may simply mirror real life, or the extratextual interactions between the two authors (or it may not). The eventual text then would simply be a product of who Jerry and Charlie "are." Of course, as authors, both have chosen to have us "read" them as they are represented in the text. By this I mean that the different readings are intentional by virtue of the authors' release of the text. Given that the events and responses to the events appear because the authors have chosen them, we can also wonder about the interactions and connections that are not detailed. Jerry's early neglect and passivity regarding Charlie's school literacy is present, yet not detailed. Charlie's later resistance, Jerry's motives for rescue, and his disgust for the school board all are possible points of interrogation for their connectedness. These intersections of seemingly separate events are complex ones. But the use of two voices, two perspectives, allows readers access to the complexity without the banality of text that overtells.

Because of the voice interplay, and the contrast of style between the two writers, readers have the chance to stand a middle ground. Jerry and Charlie both excoriate inappropriate school policy and the administrators who distribute its privledges. Yet, with two accounts, readers can stop to consider the role of policy, the ambiguity of fairness, and the constructive nature of decisions

and solutions. With the broader view that Jerry and Charlie provide, readers can choose to question the contributions of all participants. We painfully review Jerry's lack of early involvement. Charlie's choice to devalue academic literacies, even as an adult, remains problematic. The clear example of a teacher's lack of professional resources is a reminder of that Charlie's is not an isolated case. And the administrators' choices of policy over students is an indicator of the work yet to do.

The reader tells the story

From yet another view, Jerry's text appears in an educational context that is groping for new models. Restructuring in education is as ubiquitous as it is unclear. One thing that is clear at least from the rhetoric of restructuring, is the recognition that old patterns of knowing and doing, old solutions to educational problems, may no longer work. In the text, school culture is heavily critiqued for its unwillingness to acknowledge learners' inherent knowing. Postmodern education (cf. Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Weiler & Mitchell, 1992) adapts to learners rather than the reverse. A precocious reader should experience school literacies that match her interests, levels, and habits. Then, working toward commercially and socially viable literacies, teachers shape students' work within the students' zones of proximal development. Secondly, schools practices of labeling, sorting, and selecting learners are critiqued for their perverse ethics, lack of efficaciousness, and their inherent psychological terrorism. As a way of allocating school services, labeling as a practice

distributes services or commodities within a meritocracy. And even the rules of the merit system are suspect. The "most able get more" is fraught with problems (cf. Stanovich, 1986) as the sorting and selecting themselves are contaminated with inconsistency, favoritism, and mismatched construct backing (King, in press).

Another critique is leveled at the schools' inept damage control. Hampered by school conspiracies to mask responsibility, Jerry and Charlie recognize that their solutions will come from outside a social system that closes its ranks. The adversarial roles teachers and parents can hold for one another is labelled, but not analyzed. Likewise, Jerry names the history of sexist management of the school district, and the systematic devaluing of women's knowing as a factor contributing to the problems of his text. Yet, he does not examine his reproduction of similar positioning with Charlie.

His advocacy for Charlie is unwavering. Jerry's critical stance for the disenfranchised victim is characteristic of new critical text (Schensul & Schensul, 1978). In this case, and in other critical educational texts (Fine, 1991; Lankshear, 1987), the power inherent in schools and the way the power is used may force students into marginalized positions. Critical texts seek to represent those who have been marginalized by school practices. Jerry gives voice to a student who has been pushed out of the school. His own voice as a parent is a second critical response to schools. His use of polivocality is consistent with postmodern

representation and textualizing of experience (Clifford, 1988). If critical educational theorists pull apart the power relationships that problematize school relations, then they can't recreate those asymmetries when they write texts that seek to represent the schools. This includes, of course, a cautious monitoring of how writers represent "the others" they choose to create in text. And finally, Jerry's use of narrative structure suggests that sharing meaning in educational contexts is more than adherence to a research canon. We work with people and we try to understand their lives. Jerry's and Charlie's stories let me understand better what it meant to be sitting the bench during reading. Their writing helped me recognize the need for additional ways of communicating that experience.

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